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Title: Reconciliation, sense of loss capture focus of Iowa releases

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SPECIAL TO THE REGISTER

Loss - of a spouse, of a rural way of life, of a community's sense of self - and the power of reconciliation emerge as themes in this month's round-up of books by Iowa authors.

"Letters to Kate: Life After Life,"

by Carl H. Klaus (University of Iowa Press, 177 pages, hardback, \$22.95).

In November 2002, Kate Klaus, a 60-year-old Iowa City woman in good health, died suddenly from a stroke. A week after her death, her widowed husband, Carl, started writing her letters, keeping up the one-way correspondence for a year. Klaus, professor emeritus of English at the University of Iowa and founding director of the university's nonfiction writing program, has turned his letters into this moving memoir.

As the year unfolds, readers get to know Kate as a practical, plucky woman who was a poet, playwright, gardener and cook. Carl Klaus' understated prose sweeps you along with him as he struggles with the loss of his wife of 35 years and begins to evolve toward a different life.

Klaus records the heartache of closing his wife's affairs, from giving away her clothes to negotiating a refund on her unused airline ticket to Hawaii. He also chronicles his memories, dreams and the searing anguish of a broken heart: "... I've lost the very ground of my being, having thought of myself so many, many years as inseparable from you," he writes three months after Kate's death.

For people who have lost a spouse, Klaus' letters can provide solace and affirmation. "Talking to people who've experienced such a loss and then to others who haven't, I've come to realize the enormous gulf that divides the haves from the have-nots," he writes in one letter. "To know firsthand the fragility and unpredictability of life is what makes all the difference."

"Black Earth and Ivory Tower: New American Essays from Farm and Classroom,"

edited by Zachary Michael Jack (University of South Carolina Press, 312 pages, paperback, \$24.95).

"I have long been a hybrid soul," Jack writes in the introduction to this contemporary agrarian anthology. Now an English professor at North Central College in Illinois, Jack grew up on the eastern Iowa farm his family settled in the 1860s. For this collection, he has assembled a stellar group of hybrid soul mates - farm-grounded writers, college professors and policymakers - who offer absorbing commentaries on the realities of having one foot planted in agriculture and one in academia.

You won't find misty-eyed nostalgia or recycled stereotypes in these essays. Instead, the writers provide fresh and informed observations on the ambiguities inherent in melding their rural sensibilities with their intellectual passions. "From lecturing on the French Revolution to hauling manure in the spring, my life is agricultural and academic, inseparable and intertwined," succinctly sums up "The Musings of an Iowa Farm Boy," by Jeffrey Kauffman, professor of history at Muscatine Community College, Cedar County farmer and Iowa legislator.

The anthology's writers come from across the country, but Iowans - either natives or those who live here now - are well-represented, contributing 11 of the 33 essays. In addition to Kauffman, they include poet-farmer Michael Carey, novelist Douglas Bauer, U.S. Poet Laureate Ted Kooser and Frederick Kirschenmann, professor of religion and philosophy at Iowa State and former director of the university's Leopold Center for Sustainable Agriculture.

Carey offers one of the most elegantly crafted pieces. The New York native moved to Iowa in 1976 to attend the Iowa Writers' Workshop at the University of Iowa and never left. He writes deftly of how he was a topic of conversation among his neighbors, but eventually became an accepted part of the community.

"Iowa is a subtle, gently rolling land with subtle people. The language of its people reflects that," he writes. "It's not like the blatant mountains always calling attention to themselves. It's not 'The A-Team' or 'Charlie's Angels.' It's a warm story before a warm fire in a hundred-year-old house."

"Athens, America,"

by Larry Baker (First Coast Books, 300 pages, hardback, \$24.95).

Iowa City novelist Larry Baker's 1997 book, "Fleming Rising," a coming-of-age tale set in Florida, won widespread acclaim and was made into a 2001 Hallmark Hall of Fame movie. For his new novel, "Athens, America," he stays close to home, drawing on his experience as an Iowa City councilman.

The story focuses on the fallout of a botched police chase in which two teenagers are killed, an African-American drug dealer and an innocent bystander, 15-year-old Becky Hamilton. Athens, the book's setting, has long been proud of its tolerance and sophistication, but the incident embroils the community in controversy, with vocal citizens accusing the police department of racism and negligence.

Becky's parents, an African-American former football player who works as a postal clerk and his white wife, refuse to participate in the public turmoil, choosing to face their grief privately.

Meanwhile, Joe Holly, a disillusioned city councilman running for re-election, finds himself the target of public anger. But Holly struggles with his own personal crisis even as he must play a role in Athens' public drama. He still grieves his baby daughter who died 15 years earlier.

Baker weaves a political narrative on how a town should be governed with a tale of the private grief afflicting two families. The seam frays in places. A recurring deer metaphor lacks subtlety. Also, Athens is clearly modeled on Iowa City - with thinly veiled landmarks and businesses - yet in the story, Iowa City is presented as a different town, which creates a confusing distraction.

Still, Baker's tale is ultimately a humane one that exposes the soul of a community through the hearts of two men who manage to love, and forgive, through loss.

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